

LA-UR-18-28608

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Intended for: Report

Issued: 2018-09-10

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Progress Towards an Indirect Neutron Capture Capability at LANSCE: October 2017 – September 2018

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Abstract: We describe progress developing the Device for Indirect Capture Experiments on Radionuclides (DICER) on flight path 13 at the Lujan Center at the Los Alamos Neutron Science Center (LANSCE). This capability is being developed to tightly constrain neutron-capture cross section on short-lived radioactive nuclides of high importance to weapons-program sponsors via neutron total cross section measurements on the same nuclides. In this report, we describe progress in this endeavor during October 2017 through September 2018.

I. Executive summary

During this period, the following progress was made. 1) A full LDRD DR proposal was submitted, but not funded. 2) Measurements were made to assess the effect of improvements to DICER made during the previous FY. 3) Several more improvements were made to the apparatus. 4) A highly enriched ^{95}Mo sample was purchased and first test measurements are being made with this sample. 5) A new tool was developed to quickly calculate theoretical neutron-capture cross sections for a wide range of nuclear-level-density and photon-strength-function models and compare the results to cross sections in use at LANL. 6) Further analysis of DICER and other data on ^{197}Au revealed a sensitivity to the nuclear spin distribution at high excitation. 7) Talks about DICER and related topics were presented at the 9th Tri-Lab (JOWOG) Nuclear Data Workshop, the 2018 Low Energy Community Meeting, and the Sixth International Workshop on Compound-Nuclear Reactions and Related Topics. Each of these topics is addressed in separate sections below.

II. DICER full LDRD DR proposal

We submitted an LDRD DR proposal entitled “Putting the Gold Standard for LANL’s Dosimetry Network on a Firm Basis”. Although we received a very favorable technical review, our proposal was not funded. There were two main criticisms of our proposal in the feedback we received in the Q system, both of which are factually incorrect. To quote from the review; 1) “The key strategic concern was the sensitivity analysis of weapons performance to this cross section. The uncertainty in the cross section, 3x, is known, but the sensitivity analysis used in the proposal was done in the early 1980’s with outdated tools. Many tools and techniques have changed in the intervening years, so it is recommended that the team seek a modern sensitivity analysis in collaboration with weapons designers.” The uncertainty in the cross section is actually as large as a factor of 20 (e.g. see Section VI below), not 3. The study which we referenced actually was done in 2005 (see Ref. [7] below), not the 1980’s. 2) “The proposal stated the technique can be used for other radioactive isotope cross section measurements but did not elaborate. It would have been helpful to understand what other measurements could be made, presumably outside of the DR, and why they are important.” We actually presented a list of 41 nuclides of high importance to radiochemical diagnostics and nuclear forensics which could follow the LDRD-proposed measurements on ^{88}Y .

III. Measurements to assess effect of DICER beam-line improvement from last FY

The main improvement to the DICER beam line during FY17 [1] was to replace the massive shielding “cave” near the detector with a low-mass “Morgan” building. This change was expected to reduce background due to neutrons scattered from the detector which subsequently rebound from the cave walls back into the detector at later times. Although fairly small, this background is sample dependent and has been shown to be impossible to measure or to accurately simulate at other facilities. Measurements before and after the change made with samples (^{169}Tm , ^{209}Bi , $^{\text{nat}}\text{Cu}$) having black resonances indicate this background has been reduced as expected.

IV. DICER apparatus improvements

Most of the old neutron guide in the region between the shutter (7 m from the source) and the sample (30 m from the source) has been replaced by a 10” diameter vacuum pipe containing two new sets of collimators. In addition, this new beam pipe was designed so that both the sample and detector positions could be moved to shorter flight paths with minimal work, enabling more measurement flexibility. The neutron guide was part of the old materials science instrument on flight path 13. Above thermal energy, this guide scattered neutrons along its entire length thereby increasing the background level in DICER. In addition, the beam at the sample collimator was very large and poorly defined, resulting in more scattered background further downstream closer to the detector position. In contrast, the new arrangement limits the scattering to the two collimator locations, which can be shielded much more effectively, and results in a smaller, well-defined beam at the sample collimator. Beam images taken just before the sample position before this change was made revealed that the beam was seriously off center and differed substantially from the expected circular shape. While the new beam pipe and collimators were being installed, it was discovered that the last remaining section of guide outside the bulk shield (which has been deemed too difficult to remove, at present) was seriously misaligned. Considerable effort was made to realign the entire beam line, secure this guide section so that it remains aligned, and installing new alignment targets so that future alignments will be easier.

Fig. 1 shows the end result of these efforts. The beam spot at the sample position is now much closer to expectations.

The neutron guide and its supporting I beam, between the sample position at 30 m and detector at 65 m was removed. These structures were left over from the previous material science instrument. They were actually out of the beam, but interfered with access to the DICER apparatus and served as potential background sources for scattered neutrons.

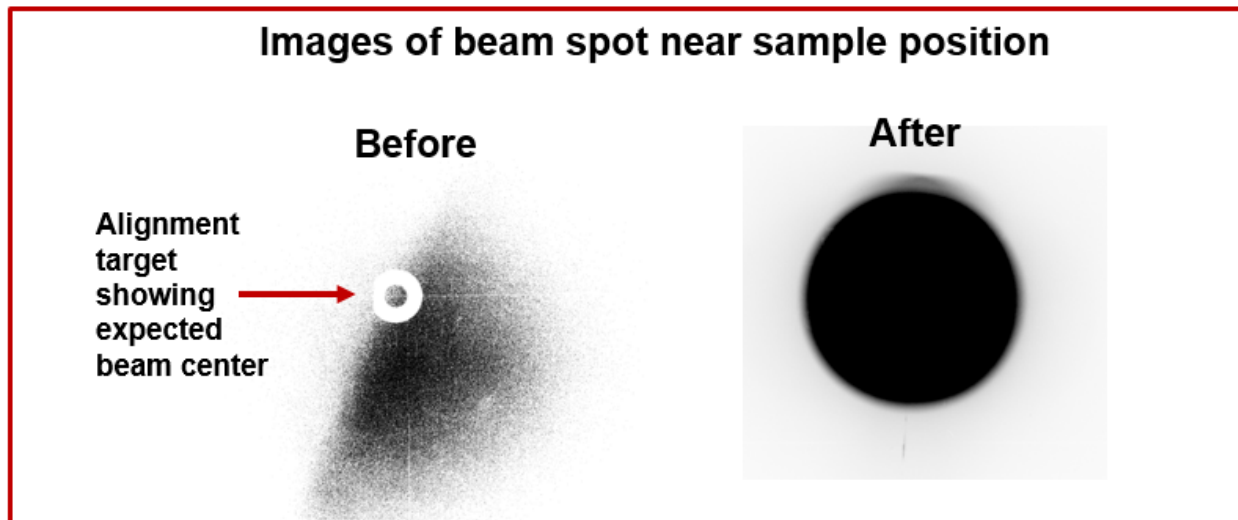


Figure 1. Beam images before (left) and after (right) installing new beam pipe and collimators between the shutter and sample, and realigning the last remaining section of neutron guide outside the bulk shield. The beam is expected to be centered and circular at this position. The poorly aligned neutron-guide section resulted in a misaligned and misshapen beam spot in the “before” image. After realignment and installation of the new collimators, the beam image is much closer to expectations.

V. Measurements with a highly enriched ^{95}Mo sample

A molybdenum sample enriched to 96.79% in ^{95}Mo was purchased from ORNL isotopes. ^{95}Mo was chosen as a test bed for future ^{88}Y measurement because theory predicts the latter should have an average resonance spacing ($D_0 \approx 20 - 200$ eV) close to that measured ($D_0 = 66.1 \pm 3.0$ eV) for the former, and because excellent $^{95}\text{Mo}+n$ resonance parameters exist [2]. To facilitate comparison to these previous data, the same sample thickness was ordered. To minimize cost, a diameter (7.0 mm) slightly larger than our current 6-mm-diameter collimator was chosen. The plan is to make transmission measurements with various collimator sizes and flight-path lengths to assess ^{88}Y measurement feasibility. These measurements are currently underway. We plan to follow them with measurements using a 2-mm diameter collimator and compare the two data sets to explore the S/N as a function of collimator size.

VI. Development of a new software tool for calculating the range of theoretical neutron-capture cross sections and comparing them to the current LANL dosimetry library

The nuclear statistical model (NSM) code talys [3] is used by researches worldwide to predict cross sections for nuclides beyond the reach of measurement. This code contains six nuclear level density (NLD) and eight photon-strength-function (PSF) models which can be used in cross-section predictions. Although these models have been tuned to produce similar results for stable nuclides where data exist, predictions for unmeasured radionuclides can vary by sizeable factors. As written, a talys calculation for each NLD-PSF combination requires its own input file and produces its own set of output files. Therefore, assessing the range of calculations for all 48 NLD-PSF combinations requires running as many calculations and piecing together as many outputs. Hence, a program was written to automatically run through the 48 possible combinations, piece together the outputs into a single file, and construct the minimum and maximum cross-section range as a function of energy suitable for plotting. This greatly reduces the time needed to generate the range of talys predictions and compare them to values currently in use at LANL.

Figs. 2 and 3 show results for ^{88}Y and ^{168}Tm produced with this new tool. In the case of ^{88}Y , talys predictions span as much as a factor of 20, indicating that this cross section is more uncertain than typical for a nuclide only one mass unit from stability. However, this is not too surprising because ^{88}Y is only one neutron shy of a closed shell and hence in a region where the average resonance spacing varies rapidly as a function of mass, and therefore very difficult to predict with any accuracy. Interestingly, the LANL value has steadily increased over the years to where it currently is near the middle of the range predicted by talys. In addition to a wide magnitude range, the talys predictions also have a wide range of shapes. As the shape of the LANL value is even more poorly constrained than its magnitude, the wide range of shapes predicted by talys is troubling.

Fig. 2 also includes the $^{88}\text{Y}(n,\gamma)$ cross section suggested by recent data [4] obtained with the Oslo technique. This method measures a product of quantities related to the NLD and PSF and requires some assumptions as well as calibrations to predict cross sections. The most important calibrations require knowledge of the average resonance spacing D_0 and the average total capture width $\langle\Gamma_{\gamma 0}\rangle$ at the neutron threshold. Because these quantities have not been measured, the Oslo data are essentially normalized using theory. Specifically, they chose an average s -wave resonance spacing ($D_0 \approx 130$ eV) about 10 times larger than used to obtain the current LANL cross section [5]. Because the neutron-capture cross section is inversely proportional to D_0 , the Oslo cross section is much smaller than the LANL value. When DICER is operational, we will be able to measure both D_0 and $\langle\Gamma_{\gamma 0}\rangle$ and hence leverage the Oslo data to obtain an even more tightly constrained $^{88}\text{Y}(n,\gamma)$ cross section.

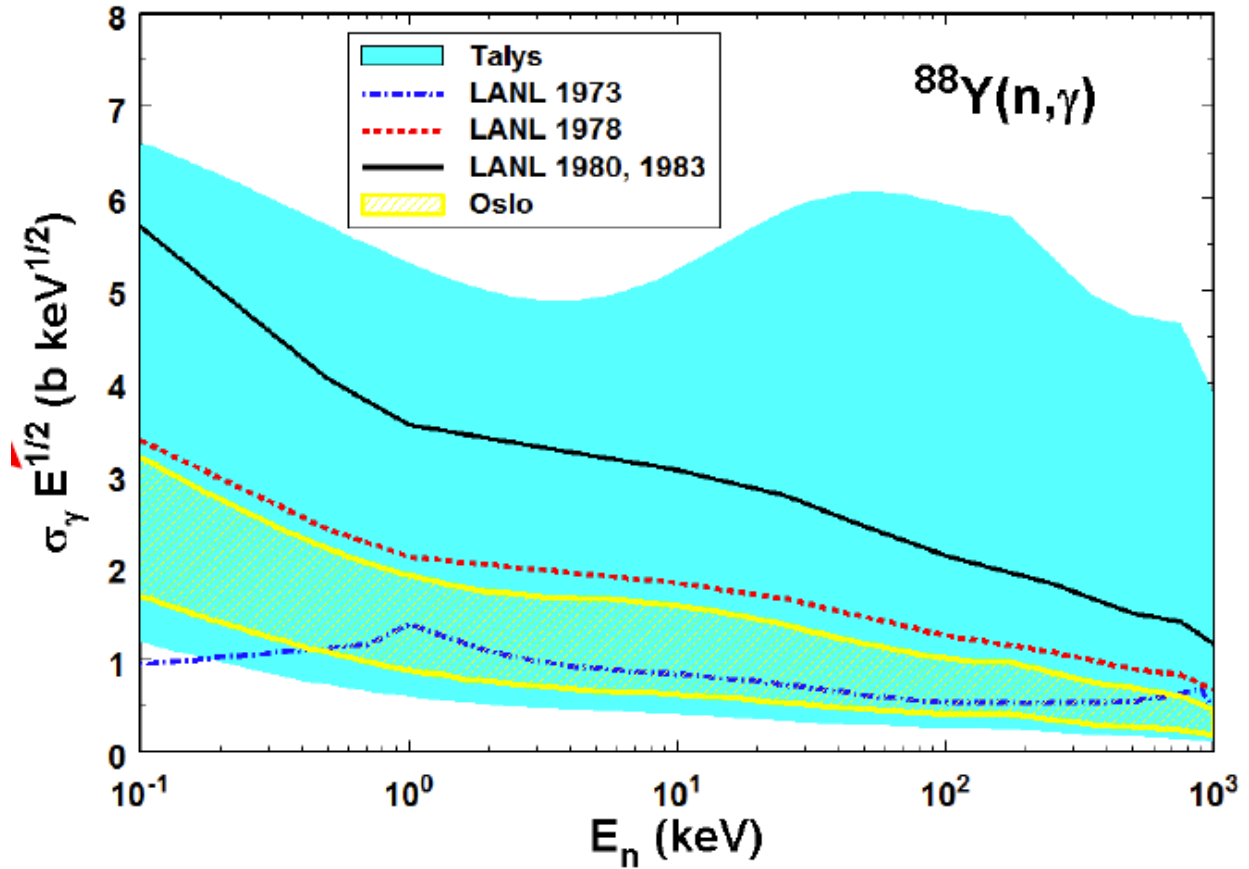


Figure 2. Range of $^{88}\text{Y}(n,\gamma)$ cross section predicted by talys (cyan area) compared to values from the 1973 (blue dot dashed curve), 1978 (red dashed curve), and current [5] (black solid curve) LANL libraries. Also shown (yellow cross-hatched area) is the value estimated for this cross section from Ref. [4].

The range of $^{168}\text{Tm}(n,\gamma)$ cross sections predicted by the 48 combinations of NLD and PSF models available in talys is compared to LANL library values in Fig. 3. In this case, the range of talys predictions is a bit smaller. However, it is disconcerting that the current LANL cross section is mostly outside the range predicted by talys, whereas the previous 1997 LANL value [6] is close to the middle of the range predicted by talys. Some details of the impact of these difference on radiochemical diagnostics can be found in Ref. [7]. Tightly constraining this cross section should be possible when DICER is operational.

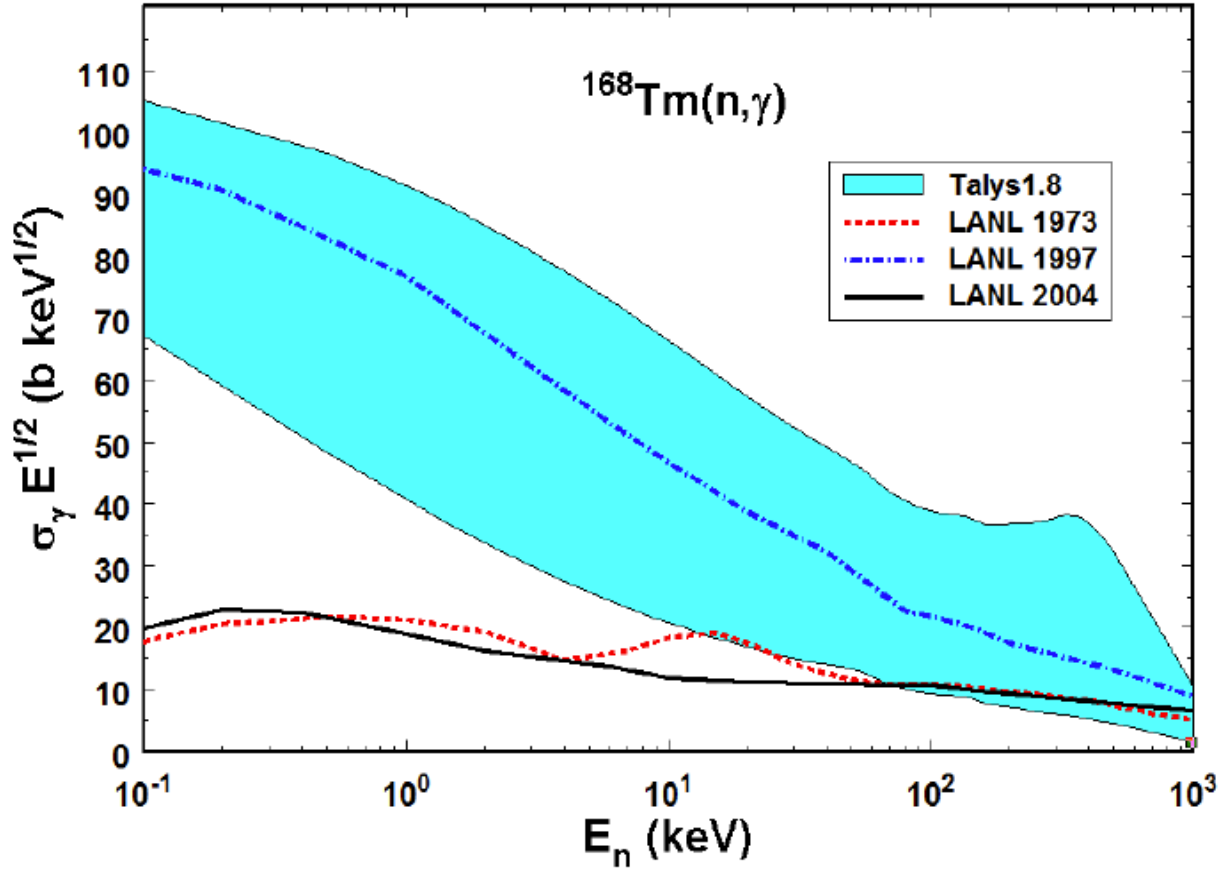


Figure 3. Range of $^{168}\text{Tm}(n,\gamma)$ cross sections predicted by talys (cyan area) compared to the current (solid black curve) and previous (dot-dashed blue and dashed red curves) LANL libraries.

VII. Using DICER data to constrain the nuclear spin distribution at high excitation

In previous reports, we have describe how the Γ_γ distribution data (blue circles and red X's for J=1 and 2 resonances, respectively) in Fig. 4 were obtained from a simultaneous *R*-matrix fit to data from DICER, *n*_TOF [8], and GELINA [9], and that the data disagree with NSM simulations (blue and red dashed curves for J=1 and 2, respectively) using the nuclear level density (NLD) and photon strength function (PSF) measured with the Oslo technique [10]. In addition to normalizations to D_0 and $\langle\Gamma_{\gamma 0}\rangle$, the Oslo technique requires the spin distribution as a function of excitation energy. For most intermediate- to heavy-mass nuclides, this distribution is very poorly, if at all, constrained by data except close to the ground state. Hence, this quantity typically is obtained from a nuclear model.

The spin distribution affects the simulated Γ_γ distributions in two ways. First, the relative sizes of the average Γ_γ values for J=1 and 2 depends on the relative number of J=0 to J=3 levels. To see how this is the case, it's important to know that the measured total gamma width for each resonance Γ_γ is equal to the sum of all the partial gamma widths $\Gamma_{\gamma i}$ for (primary) decay from the resonance to levels at lower excitation; $\Gamma_\gamma = \sum \Gamma_{\gamma i}$. In addition, dipole decay dominates so J=1 resonances can decay to J=0, 1, and 2 whereas J=2 resonances can decay to J=1, 2, and 3. Therefore, since both spins can decay to J=1 and 2, the relative sizes of the average Γ_γ values for J=1 and 2 depends on the relative number

of $J=0$ to $J=3$ levels. Second, the assumed spin distribution affects the resultant slope of the PSF and a steeper PSF results in broader Γ_γ distributions and vice versa.

Simulations with a modified spin distribution are shown as solid blue and red curves for $J=1$ and 2 , respectively, in Fig. 4. These simulations are in much better agreement with the data than simulations using the spin distribution assumed by the Oslo group.

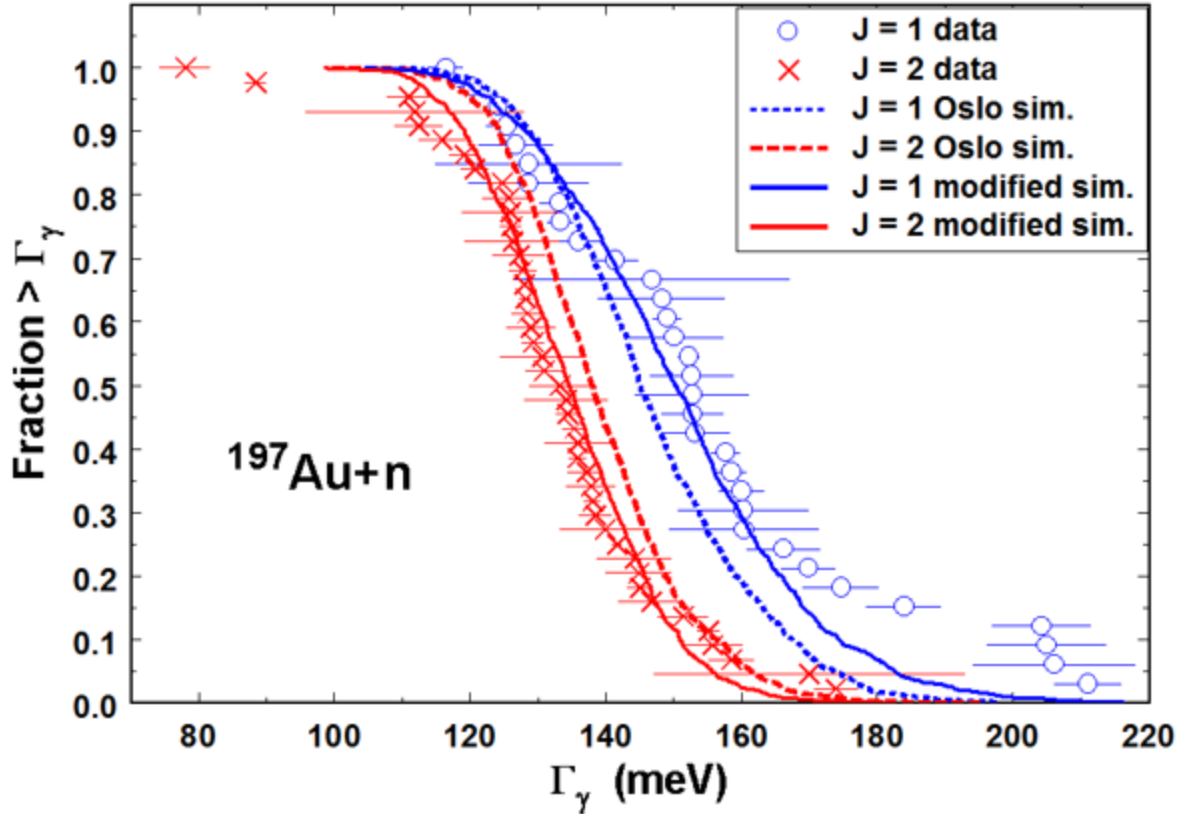


Figure 4. Total gamma width distributions for $J=1$ (blue circles) and $J=2$ (red X's) for $^{197}\text{Au}+n$ resonances obtained from simultaneous R-matrix analysis of data from DICER, n_TOF [8], and GELINA [9]. Also shown are NSM simulations of the expected distributions (dashed curves) using reported NLD and PSF results [10] from the Oslo technique. Solid curves depict simulations employing a modified spin distribution. See text for more details.

This is another example of how DICER data can improve nuclear models and leverage data obtained at other facilities to better constrain neutron-capture cross sections of importance to the weapons programs. This may become increasingly important when FRIB comes on line and researchers attempt to use the β -Oslo technique to obtain NLD's and PSF's for constraining neutron-capture cross sections for radionuclides. At present, β -Oslo data are normalized using theory, but DICER measurements, to obtain D_0 and $\langle \Gamma_{\gamma 0} \rangle$ on the same nuclides, would put β -Oslo results on much firmer footing by basing these normalizations on data.

VIII. DICER talks presented at workshops

Paul Koehler presented a talk entitled "Tightly Constraining Neutron-Capture Cross Sections for Nuclear Forensics and Radiochemical Diagnostics via Total-Cross-Section Measurements at LANSCE" [12]

at the 9th Tri-Lab (JOWOG) Nuclear Data Workshop in Los Alamos on 2 March 2018. In addition to describing the technique and current status, improvements to DICER and other nuclear physics experiments at the Lujan Center enabled by the new neutron production target [13,14] (expected to be installed in 2020), and leveraging data from other facilities using DICER data also were discussed.

Paul Koehler presented a talk entitled “Upgraded Neutron Source for LANSCE” [15] at the 2018 Low-Energy Community Meeting at the Facility for Rare Isotope Beams at Michigan State University on 11 August 2018. Both DICER and DANCE were used to illustrate the impact of the new neutron production target at the Lujan Center at LANSCE, which is planned for installation in 2020.

Paul Koehler will present a talk entitled “Attempting to close the loop on the Oslo technique at ^{198}Au : Constraining the nuclear spin distribution” at the 6th International Workshop on Compound-Nuclear Reactions and Related Topics, in Berkeley on 24 – 28 September 2018. The subject of this talk is described in Section VII above.

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